

Doing Oral History

A Practical Guide

SECOND EDITION

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CHAPTER 3

Conducting Interviews

What qualities make a good interviewer?

For Studs Terkel, the trick to interviewing successfully is “engaging in conversation, having a cup of coffee.” His interviewing style is unobtrusive, straightforward and sympathetic, but challenging when necessary. One interviewee described him as easygoing: “He doesn’t ask particularly *probing* questions, and yet he’s able to get people to open up and tell these marvelous little stories about themselves. He’s a good listener.” Similarly, Bob Edwards, who conducts hundreds of interviews annually for National Public Radio’s *Morning Edition*, describes himself as “a relaxed, easygoing guy, and I hope people are relaxed with me. They’re more forthcoming if they’re comfortable.” All interviewers need to put their interviewees at ease, to listen carefully to what they have to say, to respect their opinions, and to encourage candid responses. Listening skills do not come automatically, and interviewers have to work hard to achieve these results.¹

Interviews are partly performance. Not only do interviewers want to handle themselves well, but interviewees often feel nervous about their ability to recall and describe events long past; they also want to do well. No one wants to sound forgetful or inarticulate. Interviewers should become a partner in the process, helping interviewees become as forthcoming and accurate as possible. Interviewers need to guide without leading, providing names, dates, and other information to keep the dialogue moving. A critical task is to move interviewees beyond reluctance to an honest and perhaps self-critical evaluation of the past.²

Fundamental rules and principles apply to all types of oral history interviewing: do your homework; be prepared; construct meaningful but open-ended questions; do not interrupt responses; follow up on what you have heard; know your equipment thoroughly; promptly process your recordings; and always keep in mind the practice and ethics of interviewing.

PREPARATION FOR THE INTERVIEW

How should an interviewer get ready for an interview?

Familiarize yourself with whatever information is available about the general subject matter and about the people to be interviewed, their families, communities, jobs, successes, and failures. Interviewers first get acquainted with the outline of interviewees’ lives and then allow them to fill in the details. Read any published sources, such as family histories, histories of the town or institution, and histories of the events that the individual experienced, to understand and formulate questions.

Back issues of newspapers and magazines, published and unpublished genealogies, and other sources likely to be found in the local history section of a library or on Internet web sites are natural beginnings for your research. Some interviewees have deposited their papers in a library, although most still have their papers, scrapbooks, and other memorabilia in their closets, attics, and basements. Ask them to make these records available prior to the interview. Others bring relevant memoranda, letters, and photographs to the interview. When all else fails, ask interviewees to give brief descriptions of themselves and to suggest what other sources you might consult.

An especially helpful way to begin your preparations is to read or listen to other oral histories. Investigate other interviews from your project or the recordings and transcripts deposited in a library. Techniques vary, even from interview to interview, depending on the interviewer’s expertise and the interviewee’s cooperation and loquaciousness. Analyzing different types of questions, and ways of asking them, will help you construct your own questioning style. During the 1970s, Former Members of Congress, Inc. interviewed more than 100 former senators and representatives and gave the tapes and transcripts to the Library of Congress. A number of interviewers participated, and their transcripts reveal a variety of styles and approaches: historians asked questions that fit a mostly biographical framework; political scientists asked organizational questions about seniority, staff, committee assignments, leadership, and other aspects of congressional group behavior.³

When preparing a budget, count on doing as many as ten hours of research for every hour of interview conducted. Usually, only the initial interview sessions will require so much advance research. Subsequent interviews will build on the original research and require less preparation time. The cost of preparation decreases when several interviews can be conducted from a single investment in prior research.

Is so much research really necessary?

Yes. It is the only way to determine what questions to ask. The more an interviewer knows about the individual and the subject matter, the easier it is to build rapport and conduct the interview. Interviewees become impatient with interviewers whose questions show they do not know the subject matter.

Research also helps an interviewer supply information that the interviewee has forgotten. As they backtrack through their lives, few people remember names and dates accurately. An interview can come to a standstill while the interviewee gropes for a forgotten name ("that tall man, you know, what's his name, the economist, who smoked a pipe"). If the interviewer can provide the name ("Do you mean John Kenneth Galbraith?"), the interviewee, with great relief, will continue as if uninterrupted. If you do not know it, promise to look up the name later to fill in the transcript. Many interviewees, especially older people, lack confidence in their own memories and tensely view an interview as a test. Interviewers should try to put them at ease. Dates are also significant, since people will often jumble the chronology or merge events that took place at different times. By interjecting, "Didn't that happen in 1960 rather than 1970?" the interviewer can help the interviewee get back on track.

Interviewers need to be sufficiently prepared to know both what to expect and what not to expect from an interview. If interviewees make claims that conflict with other accounts, encourage them to explain further. Interviewees may bring up some entirely new matter that was not part of the original research. Explore this new topic by saying, "I didn't know about that. Can you tell me more about it?" Although interviewers work hard to prepare questions in advance, they must be willing to deviate from them sometimes to follow the interviewee's detours, which may provide valuable information.

How many questions should be prepared for each interview?

It is safer to have too many questions than too few. Some interviewees talk at great length in response to a single question. During a soliloquy, they may anticipate several questions on the interviewer's list and discuss these issues without being prompted. Others answer briefly and need several follow-up questions to draw them out. Whenever Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield appeared on "Meet the Press," the program's interviewers prepared twice as many questions as for other guests because the senator habitually abbreviated his responses to "Yep" and "Nope." If an interviewer has prepared more questions than time permits, another interview session would be in order.

Avoid asking the type of question that elicits a brief answer, such as: "You grew up in Grand Rapids?" "Yes." "And you went to public school there?" "Yes, I did."

Instead of simply verifying your research notes, ask: "What was Grand Rapids like when you were growing up there?" and, "Tell me about the schools you attended." Transcripts that show a string of single-sentence answers indicate poor interviewing techniques. Oral historians seek broader, longer, and more interpretive answers.

Do not ask more than one question at a time; most interviewees would address only one of them. Either the interviewer has to repeat the other half of the question later or it is simply forgotten in the flow of the narrative.

How many times should one person be interviewed?

Single-session oral histories are like "audio snapshots." Depending on the objectives and budget of your project, try to conduct more than one interview with each person. It often takes more than one interview just to break the ice. Repeated visits help establish an intimacy that encourages candidness. Both interviewer and interviewee need some time together to develop the rapport necessary to ask difficult questions and to give honest answers. One interviewee began his fourth interview session by saying, "Up till now I've been giving it to you sugar-coated," and went on to discuss his most disagreeable professional relations. It took the first three interviews to gain his confidence before he lowered his guard.

Interviewees do not necessarily hold things back deliberately; it takes time for anyone to remember all the relevant details. Most minds do not work in a precise and orderly manner, and most of us cannot call forth recollections in perfect chronological order, grouped together logically. An interviewee may talk at length about President Harry Truman's administration and seem to have completely exhausted the subject, until a later session when a question about John F. Kennedy elicits the response, "Kennedy handled that differently than Truman." The interviewee then recounts an aspect of the Truman years that had not come to mind earlier.

Some interviewees just do not have much to say. They may suffer from "mike fright" and become tense. They may not have been very perceptive. Their memories may be clouded. One interviewee in a nursing home drifted off to sleep twice during his interview, awakening each time the interviewer began to pack up the equipment and continuing the interview as if uninterrupted. There was no second session. Other interviewees will surprise you with their volubility, the depth of their recall, and their articulateness. In these cases, it is best to return for several sessions until the interviewer feels they have exhausted the subject matter.

But beware of the lonely interviewee who seeks to prolong interview sessions unnecessarily. Some interviewees have few visitors or are not taken very seriously

by their families, and they revel in an audience. Take care to be sensitive to the needs of older interviewees, but remember that you are not a psychiatrist offering free and unlimited therapy sessions.

How long should an average interview last?

Unless you are traveling and have a tight schedule that requires lengthier, even full-day sessions, plan each interview session for no longer than two hours. Longer sessions often have a "narcotic" effect on the interviewee, who can become fatigued and distracted. The interviewer will also have trouble listening to what is being said. If prolonged sessions are necessary, arrange for several short breaks to give both parties a rest.⁴

SETTING UP THE INTERVIEW

Who should be interviewed first?

Logically, you should start with the oldest and the most significant players in the events or community that you are pursuing. For any number of reasons, some people develop more influence, respect, and standing with an organization, profession, or community. A significant player may have been the one who held a critical post, had a warm and caring personality, or served as the institution's unofficial historian and record-keeper. If interviewed early in the process, they can help identify and locate other potential interviewees and help persuade them to be interviewed. Called the "gatekeepers" by oral historians, their assistance is often indispensable. The gatekeeper may have been a longtime employee who still communicates with former colleagues, or a surviving spouse, other relative, or close friend of a key figure in the events. Others often wait until the gatekeeper has sanctioned the interviews. While trying to interview Benjamin V. Cohen and Thomas G. Corcoran, the "Gold Dust Twins" who shaped much New Deal legislation, I received no response to my letters and phone calls to Corcoran. But the day after I interviewed Cohen, Corcoran's secretary scheduled an appointment, indicating that I had passed inspection.

Always keep actuarial realities in mind. Planning an oral history project can be so time-consuming that when a project is ready to begin interviewing the best prospective interviewees may either have died or become too ill to give a useful interview. Potential interviewees should be grouped according to age, significance to the theme of the project, and availability in terms of time and location. Save for a later stage of the project those who are younger, more peripheral, and further away. Travel constraints, however, frequently require that interviewees

living in a particular location be bunched together. Remember also the practical journalism advice of starting with those "who are most likely to cooperate." Less cooperative subjects require repeated invitations and patient persistence. In the end, they may agree to be interviewed only to keep others whom they opposed, distrusted, or held in contempt from monopolizing the historical record.⁵

How do you locate potential interviewees?

The oral historian has to play detective. Word-of-mouth referrals will unearth many potential interviewees, but quite often oral historians have to hunt for their subjects. If interviewing for a biography, the interviewer who has read the subject's papers will know which people corresponded with the subject and may have their return addresses on their correspondence. Online phone directories can help locate interviewees. When searching the Internet for information on specific people, start by checking their names in a general Web search engine. Government agencies place a wide variety of public records databases on the Internet regarding licensed occupations, from doctors to contractors. Databases like the Martindale-Hubbel Lawyer Locator provide information on attorneys, while Dunn & Bradstreet identifies business leaders.⁶

Certain individuals within a family, or an organization make a point of keeping in contact with other family members, neighbors, and colleagues and can provide current addresses and telephone numbers. Associations and corporations publish newsletters that reach current and retired employees and can carry stories and advertisements about an oral history project. Newspaper advertisements may also locate potential interviewees, but indiscriminate calls for volunteers may inundate the interviewer with an unmanageable number of willing interviewees and not necessarily identify those who can make the most valuable contributions.⁷

What's the best way to initiate contact with an interviewee?

By letter or phone call, state the purpose of the interview and the nature of the project. Explain what will happen to the recordings and transcripts, and describe the legal release the interviewee will be asked to sign. Follow up any phone conversation with a letter to establish a record for your own files. It is especially important for older interviewees to have your name, address, phone number, the purposes of the interview and the scheduled date, in writing.

Sometimes the interviewer plans a preliminary meeting, perhaps over lunch, to get acquainted with the interviewee and to get a better idea of the major subjects that will be discussed during the actual interviews. Being able to have preliminary meetings clearly depends on the time available, for both the interviewer

and interviewee, and the project's budget. In some projects, pre-interview sessions are discouraged to avoid losing the spontaneity and candidness of unrehearsed questioning. The television interviewer Brian Lamb complains of having "ruined" some of his interviews by asking questions before the cameras were turned on, since a question asked the second time rarely elicits as fully satisfying a response as it did the first time.

Schedule the interview at the interviewee's convenience, and make sure you arrive on time. With more prominent interviewees, scheduling can pose problems, especially if the interviewer must travel any distance to the interview. Reiterate to the interviewee the purpose of the project, and be sure to mention the difficulty and expense in arranging it. When planning to go to the interviewee's home or office, ask directions on how to get there. Nothing starts an interview more disagreeably than for an interviewer to arrive late and tense after a frantic search for the right address. Interviewers are guests and should act accordingly. Interviews can easily go awry if the interviewer arrives late, smokes, chews gum, dresses inappropriately, or otherwise offends the interviewee's sensibilities.

CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW

Where should you position the recorder?

Place the recorder where the interviewer can easily see it and periodically check its functioning, but where it is out of the interviewee's direct line of vision, to keep it from becoming a distraction. Equipment sometimes makes people nervous, but after a few minutes most will begin to ignore the recorder if it is not right in front of them. The microphone should be situated near the interviewee, preferably pinned on as a lavalier microphone. Electrical outlets, or their absence, may also determine the position of the recorder. Either use rechargeable battery packs or bring batteries in case there are no convenient outlets or the original batteries wear down. Recorders should never be completely concealed, however, since hidden recording is antithetical to the trust and confidence on which oral history depends. Surreptitious recording is unethical, and in most states illegal.

Become familiar with your equipment, both the recorder and the microphones. Failure to test equipment may cause the entire interview to be lost or so poorly recorded that it is difficult to transcribe. Every interviewer should try transcribing an interview at least once to grasp the critical necessity of good sound quality.

Most interviewers try to set up their equipment in a quiet place where the interview will not be interrupted by children, inquiring spouses, secretaries, ringing

phones, open windows, street traffic, air conditioners, loud clocks, and the like. Interviewees will want to be good hosts, but clinking coffee cups and plates, ice twirling in drinks, and other extraneous noises will all be picked up on the recording. The interviewee may be unperturbed by this everyday commotion, but it will distract the interviewer and make the recording more difficult to use for transcribing, editing, and research purposes.

By contrast, folklorists, linguists, and anthropologists will often try to capture the "sound environment" of the interview, including ambient sounds, from church bells to ocean waves. Some noises are undesirable for any purposes. An interviewer once recorded at a table under a bird cage, not noticing the sound until he played back the tape and found that "noises of the parakeet scratching in his cage all but drowned out the interviewee."⁸

What if the recording ends while the interviewee is still speaking?

Keep an eye on the recorder. Some tape recorders have signal lights that flash when the tape is about to run out. As the tape comes close to the end, take advantage of the interviewee's next pause and ask to stop while you change the tape. Always keep a new tape nearby, and remember that there is no third side to a tape! When turning the tape over, let it run a few seconds, long enough to get past the "leader." With a tape recorder, ninety minutes is the longest tape that is safe to use for oral history recording. Mini-disks allow for 148 minutes of recording time in mono, half that time in stereo.

Make a mental note of the subject that was being discussed at the time the recording stopped. Interviewees sometimes have trouble picking up the thread, even after just a short pause, and will need some prompting from the interviewer: "You were saying that. . ."

Should questions be arranged chronologically or topically?

The scheme of interviewing depends on the goals of the project. For some projects the entire life story of the interviewee will be relevant; for other projects, the focus will be on the events in which the interviewee participated. For instance, Andrew Young might be interviewed for his entire life, for his tenure as United Nations ambassador, or for his role in the civil rights movement. Biographical interviews usually proceed chronologically. If the focus of a project is on an event, then the questions will be more topical.

Jumping right into the main question is not the best approach. Avoid making the first question too abrupt and confrontational; instead, build up to the climactic questions by establishing the historical setting and making the interviewee more

comfortable with the process. People tend to recall things chronologically. Set the stage with general questions and then follow with more specific, pointed questions. Strictly topical questions may elicit responses that lack depth and context. Topical questions, however, can follow quite appropriately within a chronological framework.

Are open-ended questions preferable to specific questions?

Ideally, interviewers should mix the two types of question. Your first questions should be open-ended, such as "Please tell me about your childhood." Specific questions can follow: "What schools did you attend?" Starting with too specific a question gives the interviewer too much control of the interview. Interviewers should let interviewees explain what they think is most significant before beginning to narrow the questions. "The best oral history is a quasi-monologue on the part of the interviewee," the oral historian Sherna Gluck has observed, "which is encouraged by approving nods, appreciative smiles, and enraptured listening and stimulated by understanding comments and intelligent questions."⁹

Use open-ended questions to allow interviewees to volunteer their own accounts, to speculate on matters, and to have enough time to include all of the material they think relevant to the subject. Use more specific questions to elicit factual information, often in response to something the interviewee has mentioned while answering an open-ended question. Political reporters and courtroom attorneys use this type of mixed questioning in an approach that has been called "funnel interviewing." Their search begins with general questions and then constantly narrows until the subject has difficulty not answering the final, more specific questions. Oral history is a much less adversarial means of interviewing, but the funnel approach remains useful when the subject is controversial.¹⁰

In framing an open-ended question, the oral historian Charles Morrissey postulates that the two-sentence format often works best. The first sentence should state the problem; the second poses the question: "The records show you were a leader in establishing the zoning laws that shaped this town. Why were zoning laws your objectives?" There are a number of possible follow-up questions: "How did these laws specifically affect your neighborhood?" "What complaints were raised about these laws?" "How effective would you judge these laws to have been?" "Looking back from today, what would you have done differently?" Questions also might relate to specific zoning incidents drawn from newspaper clippings. For such a topic, a map might serve as a good visual prompt during the interview and as appendix material for the transcript.¹¹

Keep in mind that interviewers are not restricted to just asking questions. Statements of fact, concise restatements of what the interviewee has said, brief observations and comments can also stimulate responses from the interviewee as well as inject more spontaneity into the discussion. Mixing occasional comments among the questions provides some relief and can prevent the interview from sounding too much like a cross-examination. But interviewers should always use such injections in moderation to avoid skewing the contents of the interview with their own opinions.

The use of open-ended questions has also been cited as a means of "empowering" interviewees, that is, by encouraging interviewees to relate and to interpret their own stories, such questions shift the balance of power from the interviewer to the interviewee. Those who talk of empowerment view the interviewee as an "informant" and the interviewer as a "reporter." The interviewer may be asking the questions, but the interviewee is actively shaping the course of the interview rather than responding passively. These notions have raised the consciousness especially of those sociologists, anthropologists, and linguists who generally do not identify or create fictional identities for their oral sources, and of interviewers who work outside their own cultures and struggle not to impose their cultural assumptions on the people they observe and interview.¹²

Can the framing of a question distort the answer?

Pollsters say that if you can tell from what position a question is being asked, then the question is loaded. "Do you support a balanced budget amendment to end waste and fraud in the government?" is loaded. "Do you support a balanced budget amendment?" is neutral. Journalists will often ask leading and manipulative questions; the preface "Wouldn't you say . . ." is designed to produce a response that fits a particular hypothesis. Many politicians have regretted letting a reporter put words into their mouths with such questions. Researchers working on a specific book or article similarly ask questions to fill holes in their evidence, usually having in mind the answer that they *hope* to hear. The danger of this approach is that interviewees want to please and will pick up the clues, from the type of question asked to the tone of voice used, as to what type of an answer they think the interviewer wants to hear. The result is the opposite of the way an oral history should proceed.¹³

Start with broad, open-ended questions, allow the interviewee to talk broadly, ranging as far and wide as possible. Listen and make notes as the interviewee speaks, but do not interrupt. When it is clear that the person has exhausted the subject and stopped, go back and ask specific follow-up questions, clarify points of confusion or contradiction, and pursue details.

What if the answers are perfunctory?

Short answers may be a sign that an interviewer is asking too many specific questions and not enough open-ended "how" and "why" questions. Interviewees are not always sure of how much detail interviewers want. They may give answers that are to the point, but are short, unrevealing, and unreflective. Never be satisfied with brief answers and follow up with more detailed questions to draw the interviewee out.

Short answers may also indicate that the interviewer has been too quick to jump in with the next question. It requires some discipline to remain silent after asking a question, and to remain so until absolutely certain that the interviewee has finished answering. Try not to speak immediately after the interviewee stops, since it may just be a pause for a breath of air or for gathering additional thoughts. Silence indicates that an interviewer expects more. Ten seconds can seem excruciatingly long if neither party is speaking, but can encourage the interviewee to give a more detailed response.¹⁴

Sometimes answers are perfunctory simply because the interviewer has not engaged the interviewee's interest. Try varying the types of questions and the subjects they cover. Studs Terkel has described his interview with the ninety-year-old philosopher Bertrand Russell. Allotted only half an hour, Terkel knew he would be escorted out promptly when his time was up. His first theoretical question elicited only a short reply. He switched to more provocative questions and noted that as Russell became engaged, his answers grew longer. With time running out, Terkel sought "the home run question." "Lord Russell," he asked, "what is the world you envision?" Russell's response summarized his hopes and frustrations, ending with a touch of weariness. Although he might have ended there, Terkel tried for "a parting shot." "You liked Shelley when you were young, in your formative years," he said. "Do you still feel the same way?" That charming, personal question showed that the interviewer knew his subject, and had come well prepared (although it might have been more effective if he had asked it earlier in the interview). The interview succeeded because the fully engaged interviewer was constantly evaluating his interviewee's responses and changed gears to provoke more stimulating responses. Terkel reminds us that every interviewer ought to be looking for the "home run question."¹⁵

How should you deal with an uncooperative interviewee?

Former Secretary of State Edmund Muskie once greeted an interviewer by pointing out that he had given his papers to an archives so that historians would not bother him. Anyone who expected him to remember and comment on events that happened years ago "must live in the realm of the ridiculous." The interviewer

was well aware of his subject's reputed temperament, and had come prepared with a plan. He knew Muskie retained a strong attachment to his home state of Maine, and although the interview dealt with foreign policy, the interviewer asked about the foreign policy concerns of people in this town or that. The questions appealed to the secretary's interests, and he began to speak at length, continuing well beyond the mandated time for the interview.¹⁶

For many personal reasons, ranging from their state of health to their unhappiness over the way their lives and careers developed, some people will be uncooperative witnesses. Perhaps they disliked or resented the individual whom the interviewer is researching. They may not like "dredging up the past." By preparing as thoroughly as possible for an interview in advance, interviewers should be able to anticipate some of the causes of such behavior and to develop strategies for dealing with them. If one line of questioning elicits bitterness, shift to another approach. Seek areas that the interviewee enjoys talking about before raising the disagreeable questions. Be prepared to justify the need to "stir up those old ashes" after so many years and to explain why scholars are seeking answers to these questions.

Some interviewees will answer evasively. They may be testing the interviewer's knowledge. If the interviewer allows them to respond incompletely or evasively, they will continue to do so. Following up with more specific questions on the same subject, thereby indicating that the answers were insufficient, may elicit more complete or informative responses. If this tack does not work, then clearly and respectfully point out that the interviewee seems to be less than forthcoming. Perhaps the interviewee will make some explanation or finally give a fuller response. If not, the interview should be ended.

How personal should an interviewer get?

The degree to which an interview explores personal matters is something that each interviewer and interviewee will have to work out between themselves. Like the media, historians increasingly want to know about the personal and private side of public figures. The feminist notion that "the personal is political" has also contributed to the merging of the public and personal spheres in historical analysis. Whether individual interviewees will answer personal questions is another matter.

Different people have different concepts of what is personal. When Ronald Steel was interviewing Walter Lippmann for his biography, Lippmann volunteered to cooperate fully, so long as Steel did not ask anything personal. Steel soon learned that Lippmann defined the word quite broadly. Once when Steel asked him what his father had done for a living, Lippmann stared at him silently and then replied,

"I wouldn't want you to make a novel out of this." (Lippmann was not proud that his family's fortune rested on rents from tenement houses.)¹⁷ In fact, Lippmann's lawyer, Louis Auchincloss, did turn a major turning point of Lippmann's private life into a novel, *The House of the Prophet* (1980) in which the protagonist complains: "Biography is a whole new ball game. It is possible now, even in the lifetimes of our very greatest men, to persuade their friends and acquaintances to record on tape their most intimate impressions of these individuals. All you have to do is wave in their faces the sacred banner of history."¹⁸

The painfulness of recounting highly personal experiences can make an interview uncomfortable for both interviewer and interviewee. Elizabeth Norman, who interviewed American nurses trapped on Bataan by the Japanese during World War II, found it troublesome when the women cried. "I didn't think you could cry over memories that were fifty-five years old," she commented. "That was very difficult for me to watch, because of their sense of loss and they lost a lot in the war. They lost their youth, many, many friends, their physical health, in some cases their emotional health, and they would cry about it. As a human being, that was hard to watch." Interviewers need to measure the level of discomfort they are likely to cause against the relevance of the subject matter and the importance of preserving the story, treat interviewees with dignity and compassion, and pause sufficiently while interviewees regain their composure.¹⁹

How should you bring up subjects that may be embarrassing?

Having gone to great lengths to put interviewees at ease and to establish rapport, it is often hard to confront them with embarrassing questions. The sociologist John Gwaltney, author of *Drylongso* (1993), an oral history of Newark's inner-city blacks, once chided members of the Oral History Association for being too polite and discreet to "ask the embarrassing question." He argued that with some gentle and persistent prodding, interviewees will talk about difficult subjects. Playing tapes to demonstrate his point, Gwaltney showed that his questions were humorous and playful, but unrelenting. Being blind, Gwaltney also had the advantage of his interviewees wanting him to understand them; they would go on at great length and punctuate their responses with, "Don't you see?"

One way for interviewers to bring up difficult or embarrassing issues is to quote someone else. During the Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter administrations, the National Archives maintained an office near the White House where they interviewed officials as they left the administration, many of them involuntarily and under some cloud. The interviewees were often agitated and unnerved over their experience and not happy to talk about it. Conducting preliminary interviews for the Ford and Carter presidential libraries, the Archives interviewer had

to ask some embarrassing questions but tried to connect them with published sources: "The *Washington Post* reported that you left office because of such and such. Was this a fair assessment?" Since the matter was part of the public record, and the interviewees were being asked to give their own side of the story, they invariably offered their own defense. Having made the focus the newspaper versus the interviewee (rather than the interviewer versus the interviewee), the interviewer needed to be sure to follow up with questions about the subject's self-defense, its inconsistencies, and its contradictions with other accounts.

That was the approach that New York journalist William Inglis used when he interviewed the notoriously secretive oil magnate, John D. Rockefeller, Sr., while preparing an authorized biography. The elderly Rockefeller had agreed to be interviewed only to please his son, who desperately wanted to rescue the family name from the images drawn by the muckrakers. Between 1917 and 1920 Inglis conducted a string of interviews that produced 1,700 pages of transcripts. Although the planned book was never published, decades later another biographer, Ron Chernow, came across the interviews at the Rockefeller Archives. Struck by their extraordinary insights, he made them the core of his own book. As Chernow explained, "Inglis would read passages from Rockefeller's two chief antagonists, Henry Lloyd and Ida Tarbell . . . and Rockefeller would refute them, paragraph by paragraph." For years, Rockefeller had refused to read what his critics had written about him, but given the opportunity to confront the most embarrassing and questionable aspects of his rise to power in the petroleum industry he admitted, "now that I've gotten into it I find it interesting."²⁰

When confronted with difficult or embarrassing subjects, the interviewee's first response may be brief, defensive, inconclusive. The interviewer should return to the topic later in the interview. The more the interviewee attempts to explain, offers more details, and strains to make the interviewer understand, the more candid and less canned the responses will become. This approach takes time; once again, multiple interview sessions are important.

Some interviewees will stipulate before an interview that there are certain subjects that they will not discuss. Although it is possible to allude to such topics during the course of the interview, the interviewees may break their own rules and venture into the forbidden topic themselves. Ultimately oral historians must accede to an interviewee's request. It is legitimate, however, to note the interviewee's demand in the files for that interview, thereby explaining to future users why certain subjects were not addressed.

Potentially confrontational topics should be deferred until later in the interview, after the interviewer has established some rapport. While working on a history of an abortive plan to use nuclear weapons to dredge a harbor in Alaska,

an oral historian arranged to interview the crusty nuclear physicist Edward Teller. Time was limited, and Teller arrived late. Rather than ask his "warm up" questions, the interviewer decided to jump right in with an opening question about the most controversial part of Teller's involvement with the project. "This interview is over," snapped Teller as he got up and left.

To appear interested and sympathetic, an interviewer does not have to act obsequiously. If a point of disagreement is reached with an interviewee, one solution is to try to restate the interviewee's point of view. The interviewee will usually respond by further defining the position, and the dialogue is thus extended rather than terminated. Finally, keep in mind Oscar Wilde's observation that "questions are never indiscreet. Answers sometimes are."²¹

What if the interviewee asks that the recorder be turned off?

An oral history is not a journalistic interview, so there is little to be gained by hearing a story "off the record." Politely but firmly, interviewers should decline to interrupt the interview. Explain that the recording can remain closed until the interviewee is ready to release it, and that the transcripts can be edited. At times, however, interviewees may want to stop the recording to explain their hesitancy about answering a question or to ask the interviewer's advice about the propriety of discussing a person or issue. Interviewers can halt the recording to hear their problems, counsel them, and offer some reassurance before resuming the interview.

How can interviewers get beyond stories that have been "rehearsed" through frequent retelling?

Oral historians are frequently encouraged to interview the favorite storyteller and unofficial local historian. These individuals often have wonderful stories that may have folklore value, and they will tell their stories regardless of how relevant they are to the interviewer's questions. To a lesser degree, everyone tells stories about past experiences, to relive glory days, celebrate shared experiences, or make comparisons with the present. Each telling of the story embeds it firmer in the mind. Columbia has an interview with Ferdinand Pecora about the highly publicized investigation he conducted during the 1930s of Wall Street banking and stock market malpractice. Although he gave the interview forty years after the investigation, his memory was remarkable for its detail and precision. But Pecora's family pointed out that he had been telling these stories for years, and even after the interview was still telling them on his deathbed to the hospital nurses.²²

Although important for memory retention, rehearsal can create stumbling blocks for interviewers. Every telling of a story embellishes it, thereby moving

it further away from reality. Events are telescoped, chronology tightened, order rearranged and edited, drama or humor heightened. Rehearsed stories tend to omit negative events and concentrate on triumphs. Interviewees have not necessarily forgotten old wounds and mistakes. When questioned, they can recall past defeats, even if they do not always feel comfortable talking about them. By the time the oral historian asks the question, the answer may simply be the oft-told story.

The best defense against a well-rehearsed story is a well-prepared interviewer who can spot inaccuracies and gently challenge inconsistencies. But interviewees may have told their stories so often that they cannot remember it any other way. Some interviewees prime themselves for the interview, and others have stories that they will tell anyone under any circumstances. If the interviewer tries to cut them off, they may become confused or, more likely, will simply wait for another occasion to insert the stories in the dialogue. Since these stories have special meaning for the interviewee, it is usually worth giving them the time to tell their set speeches (you will probably find it impossible to stop them). After the supply is exhausted, try to ask questions that will lead down less familiar paths.²³

Rehearsing a story, through its retelling over the years, also serves as a form of self-interpretation. People not only remember their past but try to make sense out of it, rationalizing it so they can live with it. An interview with a divorced couple will probably elicit two very different versions of the marriage and why it ended. Defeated politicians have similarly reconstructed their pasts. Interviewers need to ask these interviewees to stop and think about what they have said.

Not all stories have been rehearsed mentally or anecdotally. Questions may cause interviewees to recall events long buried in their memories. They often express amazement at their recall of seemingly forgotten memories, then recount them in explicit detail and at surprising length.

How can an interviewer assist an interviewee's ability to recall?

An interviewee once commented that he felt as if his memory was on trial. Recognizing that most people do not readily remember names and dates, interviewers attempt to become familiar with the major players in the interviewee's life and with its basic chronology, not only to keep the interviews moving but to put the interviewee's mind at ease. Oral historians have similarly explored the use of photographs and familiar artifacts to trigger recall. Family photo albums, newspaper clippings, and letters have all served as tools for unearthing otherwise forgotten information. Some interviewers have even experimented with the sense of smell, to see what memories different smells elicit.²⁴

Looking through family photographs not only prompts commentary from the interviewee but can provide illustrations for the interviewer's publications. The historian Pete Daniel traveled down the Mississippi River to interview people in the towns along the way, recording their recollections of the great flood of 1927 fifty years after the event. The photograph albums that many interviewees brought out helped sharpen their memories and provided stunning illustrations for his book, *Deep'n as It Come* (1977). By contrast, Andrea Hammer began her research with a set of the New Deal's Farm Security Agency photographs taken in southern Maryland between 1935 and 1943. Decades later, Hammer located many of the subjects who still lived in that region and who could talk about the people and places in the photos. Her object was to reconstruct the social context of the photographs, an exercise that demonstrated again that photographs can be misleading, and misinterpreted, without help from those who were there.²⁵

Interviewees who demur in advance that they remember very little can often be put at ease with questions about normal routines of everyday life in the past, in their households or at work. "See, there was a lot more that you remembered," an interviewer for the Center for Oral History at the University of Hawaii commented to Lucy Robello after her interview about life as a plantation homemaker. "Well, you asked me for it, so I had to talk about," said Robello. "Otherwise I don't think that was important at all. . . . It was just normal living." Capturing on tape a way of life that no longer existed was precisely what the project wanted, and information that the interviewee could easily provide, once she gleaned the interviewer's objectives.²⁶

Do differences in race, gender, or age between interviewers and interviewees make any difference in the interview?

Interviewees take the measure of interviewers, make assumptions about what they want to ask, and to some degree try to please them by telling what they want to hear. A study of the Federal Writers Project interviews with former slaves, conducted in the 1930s, discovered that an elderly black woman was interviewed twice, once by a white woman and again by a black man. She gave starkly different accounts of her memories of slavery, painting a relatively benign account for the white woman and a much harsher account for the black man. She may well have spoken even more differently to another black woman.²⁷

Differences in age, race, gender, and ethnicity may influence both the questions asked and the responses elicited. There are no set prescriptions to overcome such differences. Some may want to match interviewers closely with interviewees, but men and women of different races and ethnicity should be able

to interview each other. In seeking to make interviewees feel comfortable, interviewers might reveal a little of themselves—where they live, where they went to school, where they work, what their families do—to establish points of commonality that might cut across some of the barriers between them.

Even without any common reference, the interviewer can compensate by having thoroughly researched the subject and being familiar with names, dates, and events long past. A well-prepared interviewer becomes, for the duration of the interview, the contemporary of the interviewee. "Oh, do you know about him?" the interviewee will say. Or "I haven't thought about that in years." During the interview, older people seem younger and more animated as they relive the past with a sympathetic listener. The Oral History Associations's *Principles and Standards* encourages interviewers to

work to achieve a balance between the objectives of the project and the perspectives of the interviewees. They should be sensitive to the diversity of social and cultural experiences, and to the implications of race, gender, class, ethnicity, age, religion, and sexual orientation. They should encourage interviewees to respond in their own style and language, and to address issues that reflect their concerns. Interviewers should fully explore all appropriate areas of inquiry with the interviewee and not be satisfied with superficial responses.²⁸

Are there any differences in interviewing the famous and interviewing average individuals?

The difference lies largely in the interviewee's previous experience of being interviewed by the media. The average person has not been interviewed and may initially feel intimidated by the recorder and microphone. For the more prominent interviewee, the interviewer's problem will be to draw a distinction between an oral history and a newspaper interview. Interviewees must recognize that what they say will not appear on the front page of tomorrow's newspaper or on the evening news, a revelation that may actually disappoint some of them but that for the most part enables them to speak candidly. They can leave a complete record, but keep it confidential so that it will not damage their careers.

Professional people can also prove difficult to interview. Lawyers, for instance, have been trained not to volunteer information. Even worse are law professors, who seem to be judging questions to see how much the interviewer already knows. If prepared and able to ask probing follow-up questions, interviewers can

earn their respect and perhaps a little more of their cooperation. Business executives may need some coaxing to think of the interview as something other than a promotional device. Most professional people and all politicians have been interviewed before as part of their jobs. They are used to responding to questions, and they have developed certain patterns of response. As a result, their answers may be superficial and packaged, and it can be hard to break through their veneer. Some oral histories with politicians sound more like radio scripts than candid interviews.

During the Vietnam War, National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger complained to reporters that "interviewing GIs is the worst way to find out what's going on. . . . The people in the middle of it have the least idea of what is happening." But historians later concluded that the GIs gave the press more accurate accounts of what was happening than did Dr. Kissinger.²⁹ When interviewing in an organization or among those who participated in a common event, it is just as important to interview the "little fish" as the "big fish." Those on the middle or lower tiers of any hierarchy usually have more time to do interviews, a broader perspective on events, and less ego invested in the operation. Those at the top may be too preoccupied and perhaps too self-centered to provide much new information. If they are still in power, those at the top are often more cautious in responding and may give little more than a press release. Interviewing at the periphery provides information that makes it easier to interview those at the center. Conversely, interviewing the top people early in the project reassures anxious subordinates that management sanctions the project. Interviewers have to take advantage of whatever scheduling opportunities they encounter and develop their own tactics in determining which individuals in any group to interview, how many, and in what order.³⁰

Should interviewers use a questionnaire?

When dealing with a group that has a common identity or was involved in a common event or organization, be sure to ask the same core questions to everyone. Especially if different interviewers are working for the same project, you should agree on a common list of themes and certain questions for all to ask. But individual interviewees have their own unique experiences that no questionnaire can anticipate. You must be willing to deviate from the prepared questions whenever something unexpected and interesting develops. Oral history, after all, addresses neglected areas of knowledge. The best items uncovered are often subjects that you were not prepared to ask questions about and perhaps had read nothing about in your research. A good interviewer hears an unexpected statement and follows up with additional questions.

Oral historians deal with individual memory and perception, which are hard to squeeze into a structured format. By contrast, behaviorists have generally preferred to collect data that could be coded and quantified. They dismissed oral history interviews for not being as objective (or true) as questionnaire-based interviewing. But in recent years, many of the social sciences have been rethinking the concept of an objective reality and have confronted the subjective (or biased) nature of all sources of information. Psychologists, sociologists, and other social scientists have reexamined the forms and motivations of verbal expression. As they have embraced their subjectivity, they moved closer to oral history methodology, putting aside their quantitative questionnaires in favor of more qualitative interviewing.

Psychological interviews traditionally required the interviewer to maintain an observational posture that discouraged personal interactions, in order to collect impartial empirical data. Breaking with this pattern, some psychologists have adopted a more interactive manner to stimulate more communication and provide more depth to their interviews. For a project on "Women, Motivation and Success," Joseph T. Chirban discarded his initial questionnaire as an obstacle and wove his previously formulated questions into something that more resembled a conversation. This led interviewees—all nationally prominent women—to move beyond their celebrity status to speak more candidly and offer more self-reflection. Chirban found that his open-ended questions encouraged the comedienne Lucille Ball to elaborate on herself in ways not evident in her previous interviews. "She experienced my openness, respect, and nurturance, qualities that she valued, and that I recognized in her," he wrote. "She responded in kind, which continually deepened the interview." More interactive interviewing, he concluded, would help therapists (as well as other interviewers) to move beyond simple information gathering to a better understanding of interviewees' feelings, values, and concerns.³¹

Nor do all social scientists favor the use of highly-structured, standardized, quantitative questionnaires with anonymous interviewees. Sociologists James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium have argued that by collecting data so impersonally, social scientists have failed to question where their informants' knowledge was coming from and how it was derived. More active, open-ended, qualitative interviewing would transform their "subjects" into collaborators with the interviewer. The interviewer's objective should not be to dictate interpretation through a predetermined agenda but to provide a conducive environment for a conversation that addresses relevant issues. Mary Jo Festle reached the same conclusions when she directed a project to interview lung transplant patients: "When people talk, they can provide clearer, subtler, and fuller explanations than quantitative data permits."³²

Can follow-up questions be prepared in advance?

Follow-up questions require both prior research and spontaneity. A thoroughly prepared interviewer will sense when the interviewee is being incomplete and will press for a fuller discussion. Research also helps you spot some new information or information that conflicts with other accounts. "I didn't know that, can you tell me more about it?" can often be the best follow-up question, since it encourages the interviewee to devote more attention to the issue and provide more details. Interviewees are often surprised when an interviewer seems to care about a particular subject that they would have mentioned only in passing if interest had not been expressed.

The most important skill in asking follow-up questions is being able to listen carefully to what interviewees are saying. Those who study listening have concluded that people generally hear only a small portion of what is said to them, a phenomenon that every parent and teacher can confirm. Even in an interview situation that is more focused than a normal conversation, the interviewer is keeping an eye on the recorder, concentrating on choosing the next question to be asked, and growing fatigued and distracted as time elapses. Listening to a tape of one of his interviews, Theodore Rosengarten, the author of *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (1974), realized that he had "set out to question, not to listen." Thinking ahead from question to question, he had allowed the tape recorder to listen for him. "Let the machine record," he admonished, "and you listen!"³³

Training themselves to remain alert saves interviewers from the embarrassing position of asking a question that the interviewee has already answered—a clear signal that the interviewer has not been paying attention—and helps flag the unexpected revelations that deserve to be followed up. In listening to the tapes after their interviews, even the most experienced interviewers will hear things that eluded them during the interview. These areas can be pursued in subsequent interviews, but not as spontaneously as when they first arose.³⁴

How should interviewers react to statements with which they strongly disagree?

The hardest part of listening is having to pay attention to ideas and information with which you may differ. You may be inclined to interrupt and argue, but you need to hear the interviewee out before confronting areas of disagreement. Challenge answers that seem misleading, and pursue responses that seem mistaken. Interviewees may misspeak or poorly express themselves; sometimes they are misinformed or just wrong. But they also may possess a more accurate version of events than the interviewer has seen in other sources and, given the opportunity, may be able to present their version convincingly.³⁵

Oral history collects the interviewee's recollections and opinions, not the interviewer's. Interviewers are not responsible for converting interviewees to any true faith, nor do they need to demonstrate that they are purer than the people they are interviewing. A true test of both the interviewer and the oral history project is whether they conducted interviews with representatives of all sides of an issue, including those whom they considered less than admirable.

But what if the interviewer suspects that an interviewee is lying or shading the truth?

Never be too quick to presume that an interviewee is wrong or is lying. Your objective is to record the story from the interviewee's point of view, even if that includes some exaggerated claims or boasting. You need not embrace totally whatever the interviewee is saying. Try to draw interviewees out further on any dubious assertions. Return to troublesome issues at different points during the interview, as a means of prodding interviewees into defending or refuting their previous statements. Do not hesitate to cite contrary evidence in newspaper accounts and other sources. Conflicting information can be attached as an appendix to the transcripts for future researchers to consider. (First, however, be sure to alert the interviewee to the added material.)³⁶

Eyewitnesses to memorable events who change their testimony and contradict themselves may be reflecting their initial confusion or the array of other viewpoints they subsequently encountered. It was no conspiracy that individuals in the crowd at Dealey Plaza the day John F. Kennedy was assassinated heard differing numbers of shots and disagreed over the direction from which those shots came. Having gone abruptly from cheering a presidential motorcade to running for cover, their fear and bewilderment contributed to inconsistencies in observations and memories. Their recollections were further shaped by news coverage, conversation, speculation, books, and motion pictures. "I have read and heard so many things, it mixes together," said Danny Arce, who worked at the Texas Book Depository. "You don't know if it's your own memory or it's somebody else's. We all read a lot of things, and sometimes inadvertently adopt things we heard from others. It's hard to separate the two, and can get real confusing trying to figure out what you remember without having your memory colored by everything that has come out."³⁷

There is also the possibility that people are lying to themselves. Some people dramatically change their positions but convince themselves of their consistency and correctness. Some may have consciously or subconsciously distorted memories of an unpleasant past. Australian oral historians encountered "organized structures of forgetting" regarding their country's Aboriginal population,

for years largely omitted from the white society's collective memory and recorded history. In Germany and Italy, oral historians have encountered mass amnesia about fascism and the Holocaust. In France, interviewers have faced a reluctance to recall collaboration with German authorities during military occupation. "Better to let the dead rest in peace and the living live in peace," commented one of those who declined to be interviewed.³⁸

As an oral history interview usually takes place years after the events occurred, it can have a cathartic effect by allowing interviewees to confront long-buried memories. In such cases, the interview serves as therapy as well as to set the record straight. But even a psychiatrist would have trouble getting some interviewees to confront the past honestly. The lie sometimes takes on a mythic significance of its own, and the interview may become valuable not for the story's accuracy but as a means of analyzing the roots of its distortion and measuring an idealized self against less favorable perceptions.

Should an interviewer pay attention to the interviewee's "body language"?

Even interviews that are not being videoed have a visual component. Sitting in close proximity, interviewers and interviewees communicate nonverbally through facial expressions and body movement. Always focus your gaze fully on the interviewee. Looking around the room, staring into space, examining your nails, suggests that you are not paying attention, just as frowning suggests disagreement or disbelief. Interviewees will either interpret such behavior as rudeness or, fearing that they are boring you, begin abbreviating their answers. Except for glancing periodically at the recorder or looking at photographs and other items relating to the interview, maintain eye contact diligently throughout the interview. A smile or a nod signals that you got the point and will encourage the interviewee to keep talking. Quiet signals are preferable to verbal interruptions ("oh, yes," "uh-hmmm," "you don't say"), which sound foolish on the recording and clutter the transcript.

Good journalists have learned to be "people watchers." Understanding that interviewees also send non-verbal cues, they ask themselves what a gesture might mean or why someone looked down while speaking. A person leaning toward the interviewer and pointing a finger projects an aggressive, take-charge attitude; sitting back with crossed legs and arms and leaning away suggests a closed, self-protected attitude. Body language may indicate nervousness about the interview, and topics that make interviewees particularly uncomfortable may cause them to shift in their seats, drum their fingers on a table, and engage in other such noticeable behavior. Some interviewees glance at the interviewer to see how an

answer has registered. Amelia Fry reported that when she interviewed former California senator William F. Knowland for a life history, he never looked at her but stared fixedly at the ceiling, "as if he was answering to a higher authority." It later became evident that Knowland was undergoing a crisis in his personal life and found it distressing to reflect on his past. This crisis caused him to commit suicide before she could conduct another interview.³⁹ In another extreme but still instructive case, an oral historian who conducted a series of interviews with prisoners at the state penitentiary detected that the inmates had "a great deal of practice at perfecting their intentionally deceptive statements." He identified such nonverbal cues as tapping a cigarette and loss of eye contact during specific replies as signals that a statement might be deceptive.⁴⁰

Sounds also play a part in nonverbal communication. Voice pitch, hesitation, emphasis, sarcasm, and muttering of asides provide indications of attitude. When people become emotional, they tend to talk faster and raise their voices. Interviewers need to catch these nonverbal clues, since they are almost impossible to transcribe. A sarcastic inflection, for instance, can completely change the meaning of a sentence. The interviewer might point out a sarcastic response and ask the interviewee to explain the sarcasm.

Is there a role in oral history for what social scientists call "continuing observation?"

Oral historians have rarely shared the interest of social scientists in observation as part of the interviewing process. Historians tend to isolate interviewees from their environment and to put them in a quiet place where they will not be interrupted during the interview, whereas in other disciplines subjects are examined in their natural setting. Anthropologists, for instance, live in communities to record their day-to-day observations along with their subjects' testimony.

Richard Fenno has encouraged political scientists to collect data by "interactive observation," by which he means "following politicians around and talking with them as they go about their work." Fenno accompanied politicians through their home districts, through elections, and through their legislative service:

Much of what you see, therefore, is dictated by what they do and say. If something is important to them, it becomes important to you. Their view of the world is important as your view of the world. You impose some research questions on them; they impose some research questions on you. That interaction has its costs most notably in a considerable loss of control over the research process. It also has benefits. It brings you extremely close to your data.⁴¹

Fenno's prescription describes what many social sciences consider effective fieldwork. Although oral historians often travel to the area where their interviewees live and are interested in their environment, participatory observation has not been a major component of the oral history interview. Oral historians frequently interview those who have retired and live in different communities from where they spent their careers. Observing current daily routines would not offer many clues about the past that oral historians seek to capture on tape. Sometimes, however, interviewees want to show interviewers buildings and other sites that played an important part in their past. Oral historians should take advantage of such offers and visit the sites, bringing along their recorders, cameras, and possibly video cameras to supplement the interviews.⁴²

CONCLUDING THE INTERVIEW

What's the best way to conclude an interview?

Look for a natural "wrap-up" question, something that causes interviewees to reflect back on their lives, to compare recent events with their earlier years, to draw conclusions about major events, or to look ahead toward the future. Ask the interviewee whether there are any other issues that could be discussed. Occasionally, an interviewee has anticipated a question that the interviewer did not raise. The interview itself may have triggered memories of long-forgotten people and events that the interviewer had not researched. Encourage interviewees to put whatever they consider important into the record.

At the conclusion of the interview, remind the interviewee of how the recordings will be processed and where they will be deposited. Explain what their role will be in editing the transcript and in signing the deed of gift. Sometimes the interviewee is asked to sign a release immediately after completing the recording session and another release later approving the transcript; other times no release is signed until the interviewee has reviewed the transcript. The timing depends on how quickly a transcript can be produced and on whether the interviewee is likely to request that the interview be restricted.

It is customary to present copies of the recording or transcript to the interviewee and to sometimes make additional copies for family members. If the object of the interview is an article or book, try to give a copy to the interviewee. Plan to invite interviewees to exhibit openings or other public presentations based on the interviews.

You cannot simply walk out the door with someone's life story, their candid reflections, and sometimes extremely personal observations. Interviews can be

difficult, emotional experiences, and sometimes you need to spend some time to talk with the interviewee after the interview, without the recorder running. Let interviewees know how important their interviews will be to the oral history project, and reassure them that they were helpful. Give them some idea of how long it will take to process the interview, when they can expect to receive copies of the recording or transcript, when they will sign the deed of gift, how you expect the material to be used, and where the interview will be deposited and opened for research.

Should interviewees ever be paid for their interviews?

Most oral history projects work on such limited budgets sometimes depending on volunteer staff that they rarely can afford to pay interviewees. They operate on the valid principle that having one's life story recorded for the future is reward in itself. A very few projects, however, especially those in which the interviews are with musicians and others commonly paid to perform, have recognized some financial obligation to the participants. Blues and jazz projects have further justified their decision to pay on the potential profitability of the interviews. "Since blues is a marketable form of oral history," wrote Walter Liniger of the Blues Archives at the University of Mississippi, "we felt morally obliged to secure the rights of the informants and to pay them a fee for their contributions."⁴³

Obviously, any financial arrangement depends on the resources of the sponsoring project or institution. Some projects have written stipends for interviewees into their grant proposals, similar to the honoraria paid to their advisory committee members. But whether or not payments are made, all oral historians have a responsibility to inform interviewees of the anticipated uses of their interviews, whether in publication, radio or video documentaries, the Internet, CD-ROM, or other means of public presentation that might generate royalties or other monetary compensation.